



**Testimony from Paul Dworkin, MD- Pediatrician and Executive Vice President for
Community Child Health at Connecticut Children's Medical Center
to the Children's Committee
Regarding SB 929- *An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School
Meals to All Students***

February 6, 2023

Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, and members of the legislature's Children's Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share our support of Senate Bill 929 - *An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School Meals to All Students*.

My name is Dr. Paul Dworkin and I serve as the Executive Vice President for Community Child Health at Connecticut Children's Medical Center. I wish to offer my support of this proposal because no child should ever go hungry, especially at school.

Before commenting on the bill, we want to provide some background about the Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health (the Office). At Connecticut Children's, we know that only about 10% of children's overall health and wellbeing is determined by the access to and quality of the health care services they receive. The Office works to improve the wide variety of factors that influence a child's health (often referred to as "the social determinants of health") such as housing, transportation, food and nutrition, and family support services.

At Connecticut Children's, more than half of our patients rely on the state's Medicaid program as their source of insurance coverage. As such, we are keenly aware that a family's finances influences their ability to access care and services for their children. All too often, we see families who lack reliable transportation to travel to medical appointments, cannot afford all of their utility bills, or struggle to purchase health foods for their family. These factors greatly impact the health of children and their families.

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated many of the existing social and economic challenges facing families. In our emergency department, we have screened families for food insecurity and recently found that around 39% of families screened positive. Anecdotally, we know that a portion of these families do not meet the qualifications for their children to receive free lunch in school.

As a developmental-behavioral pediatrician I can assure you that kids cannot learn to their fullest potential if they are hungry. Healthy foods and full bellies are essential for children's optimal healthy growth and development. By making no-cost school lunch available to all children, we can destigmatize free school lunch and best of all, help ensure that hunger does not harm any child's readiness to learn during the school day.

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic present an opportunity for state leaders to think bigger and bolder than ever before about what it means to support kids and families. Now more than ever, it is critical that Connecticut legislators prioritize initiatives, like free school meals for

all, that help keep children healthy, because healthy children grow up to be healthy and productive members of our communities.

Thank you for your consideration of our position. If you have any questions about this testimony, please contact Emily Boushee, Connecticut Children's Government Relations Associate at eboushee@connecticutchildrens.org.